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ILLITERACY IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations
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An illiterate is a person who cannot use reading, writing or computational skills in everyday life situations. These may include filling out a job application, or reading medicine bottles, newspapers, ballots, telephone directories or warning labels on household products. Illiteracy can be measured either by administering a sample test that simulates "real life" situations requiring literacy skills, or by compiling figures on completion of the 5th, 8th or 12th grades as benchmarks of literacy. Either way, those affected are not only handicapped in their daily lives, but also cannot participate fully - or sometimes even marginally - in the nation's economic, political and social systems.

EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

The actual extent of the problem is difficult to assess. Statistics at the national level show rates of 13, 20, or even 33 percent illiteracy in the adult population (over age 16). California statistics are said to parallel, or run slightly above, the national rule-of-thumb average of one in five (20%). Most State agencies quote 25%, or 4.8 million adults.

Estimates for Los Angeles County range from half million (Robert Eburu, Chair, Times-Mirror Corporation) to over one million (California Literacy Campaign). Census data, while not available specifically on illiteracy, show that among approximately 15% of the County population over age 18 English is "not spoken well."

CHARACTERISTICS OF ILLITERACY

The profile of an illiterate varies; it is not an issue confined to any one socioeconomic class or ethnic group. The incidence of occurrence is much higher, however, among certain populations and the adverse impact on the poor, urban dwellers, minorities and the aged is well-documented by several studies. The U.S. Census Bureau literacy test found that 42% of illiterates had earned no income in the previous year and that 70% were high school dropouts. The University of Texas Adult Performance Level Survey (the largest study to date) found that 41% of illiterates live in an urban area and that 37% do not speak English at home, and the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education states that the largest number of illiterates are high school dropouts. The Department of Education's Adult Literacy Director says that a third of the problem is among adults age 60 and over, "the elderly," due to their relatively less formal education.

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INCIDENCE IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES

All statistics point to a proportionately higher illiteracy rate among Blacks and Hispanics. The National Council of La Raza, in its report Illiteracy in the Hispanic Community, cites 39-49% as the number of illiterate adult Hispanics. Blacks fare no better--Kozol claims that their illiteracy rate is around 50%. These statistics correlate with the Texas APL study, which cites 44% and 56%, respectively, as the rates for Blacks and Hispanics. Los Angeles County Library Literacy Program user figures also show that services are utilized by Blacks and Hispanics at a higher rate. Although Native Americans comprise a statistically small segment of the population, their illiteracy rate parallels, or exceeds, that of the Black and Hispanic populations. One exception to the minority illiteracy rate is the Asian community. Among this group, illiteracy is estimated to include only 3-5% of the population.

Illiteracy and the dropout rate, especially, are inextricably linked. Reading problems are cited as a primary cause of dropout by the County Office of Education. In California, the dropout rate is 25% higher than the national average and has doubled since 1970. This, too, adversely affects minorities--while three out of ten high school students dropped out in 1983, that ratio was raised to four out of ten for Black and Hispanic students. This is particularly germane to Los Angeles County, as inner-city students have a dropout rate of 40-50% (compared to the national average of 30%). Those who leave school with incomplete reading skills are essentially lost to the system and, unless remedial measures are pursued, they are relegated to a lifetime of frustration and impaired earning capacity. Alienation, a key factor in the dropout syndrome, is the ubiquitous product of illiteracy in our culture.

A final characteristic is poverty. The California State Library's figures show that one-third of mothers receiving welfare (AFDC) are illiterate. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services literacy survey showed that 25% of its recipients were illiterate. Thus, a profile emerges wherein an urban-dwelling, poor, minority, usually high school dropout and often elderly individual is the "typical" illiterate.

SERVICES AVAILABLE

Services available fall into three general categories: public volunteer programs, the educational system and private functions. The major public provider in the State is the California Literacy Campaign, a \$3.5 million volunteer program of the California State Library system which is geared to English-speaking adult illiterates and is considered a model program of its type. Of the educational avenues available, the two largest are the Adult Basic Education Program, which will take illiterates, and Adult Schools, which requires at least sixth-grade reading proficiency, and therefore, eliminates many illiterates. Both programs fall under the aegis of the Los Angeles Unified School District. The Laubach Program, which has developed its own teaching methods and formed its own publishing arm (New Reader's Press), and Literacy Volunteers of America are both private programs which also rely on volunteer tutoring.

FUTURE SCENARIO


Despite a perceived plethora of programs and increased national attention (e.g., the PBS/ABC-sponsored literacy campaign, "American Ticket"), less than 5% of the need is being met. The waiting lists to enroll in most programs are long; the list of volunteers and available money is short. According to Lynda Smith, Literacy Consultant to the State Department of Education, the combined efforts of all illiteracy programs in the State are reaching no more than 650,000 adults per year, "a drop in the bucket."

The causes of illiteracy are myriad: learning disabilities, school dropout, overdependence on television, "invisible" handicaps. Its perpetuation can be ascribed to fewer sources: primarily lack of knowledge about or access to remedial programs, and the fear and shame that causes illiterates to develop elaborate "covers" rather than risk detection.

Johnathan Kozol, author of Illiterate America, estimates that by the year 2000, two out of three Americans will be functionally illiterate. While the actual scenario may not prove that grim, the reality of the problem is that in an increasingly technocratic and information-oriented society, illiterates will continue to fall further and further behind both economically and socially. The Education Director of the AFL-CIO, for example, warned that by the 1990's "anyone who does not have at least a 12th grade reading, writing and calculating level will be absolutely lost." Author and policy analyst Harlan Cleveland concurs, stating that by the end of the century two-thirds of all jobs will be in the "information industry."

To this end, several pieces of recent legislation have focused on the illiteracy issue. Of those, the major one is the English Proficiency Act, a \$10 million Federal grant program co-sponsored by Senators Cranston (D-CA) and Bingaman (D-NM) which is pending approval. Another bill, SB 1630 authored by State Senator Art Torres, has been approved to allocate \$1.2 million for Adult Education Programs. A Federal bill is pending for the Even Start Program, an adjunct to the Head Start Program which is designed to reach children in the "at risk" population. Finally, the Department of Public Social Services is in the process of designing and implementing a literacy component under their Greater Avenues for Independence program (i.e., "workfare").

The extent to which any of these measures will be successful is problematic. Illiteracy is an issue which, at this point, has attracted enormous attention and public outcry, and in which little actual progress has been made. It is estimated that the "pool" of illiterates remains about the same or grows slightly each year. The ways in which Los Angeles County is particularly affected are clear, but less obvious are which measures will prove most effective for our specific population. While remedial programs are to be commended, long-term causes and solutions must be addressed or the problem will simply continue to be self-perpetuating.



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RELEVANCE TO LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION ON HUMAN RELATIONS

Given the Commission's concern with the inequitable treatment of various racial and ethnic groups and the impact of this on the society at large, it is certainly appropriate for the Commission to consider holding a hearing on illiteracy in Los Angeles County. Not only does this issue have immediate impact on our constituency, but relatively little information is available on long-term implications within the County and ways in which local public policy can help, or hinder, amelioration of the problem. A hearing that could elicit and focus testimony on such questions would be extremely valuable both for the Commission and for individuals and agencies addressing the issue.

Areas for the hearing to focus on might include:

- Causes of higher illiteracy rates in different native-born racial and ethnic populations as contrasted the White Non-Hispanic population.
- Causes of disparity in illiteracy rates among different native-born racial and ethnic populations.
- Impact of discrimination, poverty, and socioeconomic class on illiteracy.
- Cultural, social, factors that support or impede development of literacy.
- Successful literacy programs.

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2. Barbara Clark, Principal Librarian, Los Angeles City Public Library
3. Lou Gonzales, Students at Risk Program, Los Angeles County Office of Education
4. Marilyn Douroux, Los Angeles Unified School District Black Education Commission
5. Juanita Stanley, Director, California Literacy, Inc.
6. Armand Porter, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services
7. Marilee Marrero, Literacy Coordinator, Los Angeles County Library
8. Pete Martinez, Los Angeles Unified School District
9. Dr. Lynda Smith, Literacy Coordinator, California State Department of Education
10. Jim Figueroa, Operations/Enrollment Division, Los Angeles Adult Schools
11. Aryola Taylor, Adult Basic Education Program, Los Angeles Unified School District
12. Paul Kiley, Community Organization Consultant, Library Development Services
13. Michael Genzok, Bilingual Education Program, Los Angeles Unified School District
14. Robert Eburu, Chair, Times-Mirror Corporation
15. H. W. McGraw, Chair, McGraw-Hill, Inc.
16. Lori Orum, National Council of La Raza
17. David Crippens, Vice President, Educational Enterprises, KCET-TV
18. Dr. Sam Kermoian, U. S. Department of Education, Region 9
19. Dr. Miriam Rumjahn, Los Angeles Unified School District Asian Education Commission
20. Alicia Stevenson, Los Angeles Unified School District Indian Education Commission
21. Sandra Sempner, Division Chief, GAIN Program, Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services
22. Ed Lee, California Association for Asian-Pacific Bilingual Education

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